Negotiating Public Spaces in the 'World City': The Interplay of City, Nation and the Global as Overlapping Spatial Oeuvres on Tel Aviv's Shoreline

For many years, only tourists regarded the Tel Aviv shoreline as the most attractive place in the city. Tel Avivians considered it indecent because of improper body exposure and unhealthy due to seaside humidity. The shore - neglected and detached from the fabric of the city - attracted marginal groups whose behavior was considered unsuitable or even deviant. It was only in the 1980s that the municipality and the broader public discovered the beach as an asset and that massive development took off (Hatuka and Kallus, 2007). With these changes, the marginal patchwork ecology of the shoreline suddenly found itself within the fabric of the city. The public space of the shoreline, dotted with 'pockets of deviant behavior', became the main site for negotiating inclusion into and exclusion from 'the public' as political community, conducted primarily via bodily urban design of these pockets, responded to by urban planning and regulation.

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INTRODUCTION

This paper examines negotiations for social inclusion as they are manifested in the bodily urban design and regulatory urban planning of gay cruising at Independence Park, the main cruising site in Israel for five decades, before and after its dramatic redesign in 2009. We discuss Independence Park as *oeuvre*, or work of art, following Henri Lefebvre's influential understanding of the city as a spatial and social product formed as result of human relationships and conflicted interests over it (Lefebvre, 1991). Negotiations over Independence Park as oeuvre proved transformative for the agents involved: an outcast community of global characteristics gained acceptance into national identity; a peripheral city gained

the status of 'global city'; and a nation-state critiqued for violating the transnational value of human rights granted credibility as gay-rights tolerant. This case study is therefore unsettling to social science theory based on sharp distinctions of spatial categories (state, city, and globe). If spatial oeuvres overlap, as suggested here, reconceptualization of social space is required.

Scholars tend to view the city, the nation and the global as three alienated spatial categories. Neo-Marxist scholars like David Harvey (2009) and Kim Dovey (1999) have studied the city as the site for universal issues of capital accumulation and class struggle, within the scope of global neoliberal economy which transcends all nations. At the same time scholars of globalization such as Manuel Castells (2000), Saskia Sassen (2001) and Anthony King (2004) identified a network of 'spaces of flow' composed of 'global cities' sharing similar qualities that differ dramatically from the 'spaces of place' around them. These cities undercut and overpass nations, presenting the nation and the city as two opposing spatial-political communities, competing over resources and proposing two distinct governmental and economical frameworks. Yet worldwide social struggle in the past decade against the global phenomenon of neoliberalism - taking place primarily in 'global cities' - saw citizenries make surprising claims upon their respective nation states to re-assume themselves as rights-bearing citizens. The nation-state is the only modern framework which makes participation in governance possible, and is thus distinguished from various transnational forms of membership, such as the UN, the 'network society', multinational corporations or transnational communities based on identity categories like gay sexuality, focus of much scholarly attention in the past two decades (Castells, 2000; Sassen, 2001). While the nation state was studied as a bygone social structure by scholars of globalization, neoliberalism and neo-Marxist theory (Castells, 2000; King, 2004, Harvey, 2004), recent events in the Middle East, Europe, America and Russia clearly mark it as the key framework in which people claim their political and economic rights (Richter, 2013; Tureli, 2013, Simone and Fauzan, 2013).

This paper attempts to study the interplay between global, city and nation as overlapping spatial oeuvres produced by the social production of space, by examining Israeli gay community's struggle over Independence Park in Tel Aviv. Examining gay cruising in Independence Park, this paper asks what is at stake in the struggle over urban spaces looking beyond the scope of the city, especially in a city aspiring to become a 'global city,'[1] which is also located in a nation state going through an ongoing spatial conflict. How is struggle over the social production of urban public space relevant for struggles over the identity and political community of the nation? This paper therefore aims to (a) examine surprising 'urban design' of public space as a means for claiming stakes over the city and negotiating social inclusion in the nation in the name of a global community (b) rethink the global-city-nation relationship, often studied as opposing spatial frameworks, as *overlapping* spatial oeuvres where political communities are produced and negotiated.

PUBLIC SPACE NEGOTIATIONS OF GLOBAL, CITY AND NATION
On July 6th 2009 Independence Park, the main homosexual cruising site in the Tel Aviv metropolitan area and Israel at large, was re-opened after two years of renovation to 'restore its original design' (Dekel, in Ben Josef, 2009).[2] While gay representatives in city hall stated that 'The park will maintain its character and return to serve for cruising… the city views the park as important meeting place for our community', the renovation is commonly understood to have made cruising impossible by means of landscaping and urban design, thus 'returning the park

to the general public' (Halperin, 2009). New lawns, children's playground, lighting and open vistas transformed the park's landscape (Figures 3, 4).

Debates within the gay community over the redesign of the park have poled between arguments rejecting cruising, for example stating that 'the entire public has the right to access public space... just as we gays have the right to access the entire city' (Weizman in Halperin, 2009) versus laments over gay leadership 'giving up our communal territory because it represents the 'perverse' aspects of homosexuality, in order to become accepted into mainstream society' (Merhav, 2008, p.1; Manor, 2009). Both perspectives, nonetheless, understand the redesigned park as *symbolically replacing the rainbow flag over Independence Park with a national flag* (Figure 1) (Lavie, 2009). Figure 1 suggests that gay community aspirations of integration into mainstream society extend beyond urban society - to Israeli society at large.

1a, 1b

Figure 1a: The replacement of the gay rainbow flag over Independence Park with a national flag. Note the park's open landscape and its use by a child, a heterosexual couple, a dog and an elderly man. Illustration: Dudi Shamai, in Lavie, 2009. Source: Dudi Shamai.

Figure 1b: Homosexual couple with child, waving the gay pride flag at the central public space of Rothschild Boulevard. Painting by Rafi Peretz, courtesy of the artist.

A global practice of a transnational community, gay cruising is nonetheless deeply in need of concrete space in city and nation, and is often constrained or persecuted via state law and municipal bylaws. Cruising activity in Tel Aviv, recorded since its founding in 1909, has shifted between several sites along the shoreline, pushed back to the city's margins following the ongoing development of the city. Prior to the appropriation of Independence Park for cruising in the mid 1960s, cruising activity took place on Gordon Stairs in the late 40s and 50s, at London Park in the 30s and 40s, and at Samuel Square in the 20s and 30s (Figure 2). The migration of cruising northwards along the shoreline was the result of explicit attempts to drive out cruising activity using urban planning and urban design actions, involving landscaping, lighting, and constriction (Allweil and Kallus, 2008).

Independence Park was allocated in Sir Patrick Geddes, celebrated 1927 urban plan for Tel Aviv to serve as the future-city's main urban park (Geddes, 1925). The site included a British army base till 1948, and first planting in it celebrated Israel's first Independence Day, in 1949. The park was designed as English Garden by Abraham Karavan, head of the Tel Aviv parks department, to match the site's natural conditions of sea wind and salt air, and officially opened in 1952 (Feniger, 2009). Independence Park was named after Israel's 1948 coming of statehood, just like the main parks of Jerusalem and Haifa, reflecting the sense that a city's large urban park is not only of the city but also of the nation.[3] Located in a residential neighborhood and facing the Mediterranean, the park served the general public as can be seen in historical pictures (Moria and Bar-Nir, 2003). The shift in park use involved

the construction of the Hilton Hotel in its center in the early 60s. The political and economic significance of the Hilton in the cold war period enabled Hilton representatives to claim this site despite the fact it was a public park (rejecting a sited offered on the promenade) by applying pressure on the city via state government (Hilton file, Tel Aviv Archive). During construction the park was closed to the public for a period of six years, during which it drew cruising activity pushed north from Gordon Stairs. When the park re-opened it was already recognized as a cruising site and the public refrained from using it (Allweil and Kallus, 2008).

Independence Park served as main gay[4] cruising site in the Tel Aviv metropolitan area and Israel at large until 2009.[5] While the park served a number of social activities for gays including activism and socialization (Fink-Sumka'I and Press, 2000), it was arguably shaped by the fact of its 24/7 use for explicit sexual activity. This sexual activity in the park created 'hollows' within the bushes, narrow paths transcending the park's layout and unplanned uses of structures in the park, particularly of the public toilets and monuments. In response to this sexual activity, the city closed down the public toilets, installed high-voltage lighting, trimmed the dense bushes, and made several attempts at an urban planning intended to open the park and limit its use for homosexual cruising (Merhav, 2008; Hirsch, 2005). Independence Park has enabled a homosexual territory within the city, performing a gendered critique of the heterosexual male and its domain over urban and national space (Hirsch, 2005). At the same time, appropriating an autonomous enclave of otherness, gays stated - spatially - that autonomous identity requires autonomous territory, a logic similar to that identified by Weiss for early Zionism (Weiss, 2002).

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Located on a cliff overlooking the Mediterranean, and at the base of the Hilton Hotel, the park is both inside and outside the city (Figure 3). The environmental conditions of salt air and winds require constant maintenance and have led to the park's year-long run-down condition, which complemented its 1950s English-garden 'natural' design. At the same time, proximity to the Hilton and to the city promenade sets the park at the heart of the city, easily accessible by foot from key sites - and impossible to ignore. Like city parks worldwide (Betsky, 1997), flexible social codes and 24 hour accessibility, darkness and concealing greenery, as well as free entry, have made Independence Park a center of homosexual activity across social, ethnic, and class divisions, based on sexual preferences and attractions that defy conventional social hierarchies (Hirsch, 2005). Through cruising men acquire social status deriving from their sexual desirability rather than national, ethnic, religious or class distinctions relevant outside the park, generating intimate interactions among men from social strata otherwise understood as irrevocably alienated from each other. As Kobi, a Jewish-religious scientist from the larger metropolitan area told us:

> *One of the thrills here, I have to admit this, is having sex or even just talking to someone who is so very different from me, except for being a homo that is.*

Figure 2: The movement of homosexual cruising along the shore: from London Park starting in the 1920s; to Gordon stairs in the 1940s; and to Independence Park starting in the mid 1960s. Source: Tel Aviv GIS.

Differences you cannot get past in the bar or web scenes, you can transcend here. I had something you can call a relationship with someone from Ramla, a Muslim Arab with no high-school diploma, a [Palestinian] national activist. Both of us would never have considered it elsewhere (Kobi, 2005).

BODILY URBAN DESIGN

Cruising has contributed significantly to the park's bottom-up urban design as a distinct landscape within the city's urban space. The park's distinct landscape while it served for cruising was designed not by landscape architects or gardeners but by the constant movement of bodies in space, forming new narrow paths in the bushes in search for hiding spots and 'caves' in the bushes for courtship and sex. In addition to the four formal entrances to the park, bodies sneaking in and out of it through the thick greenery have formed many informal paths that permitted entering the park unobserved. Existing structures in the park - a large sculpture, a public toilet, and a gardening shed - were used as sites of sexual encounters (Figure 4). Although officially a public space in a heterosexual city, Independence Park has existed for more than four decades as an autonomous territory, a domain of homosexuality in the city and the metropolitan area, where many men first explored the possibility of a homosexual identity (Avni-Levi, 1995). Iconic symbol of the gay cause in mainstream discourse, the park played a central role in rallies and gay-pride events calling for gay rights and embodying homosexuals' demands for equal inclusion in Israeli society (Sumaka'i-Fink and Press, 2000). Claiming a territory in the city for performances excluded by the city itself, Independence Park users staked an overt claim for the right of their identity to be part of the general public and to participate in the production of the city as *oeuvre*.

Unlike the quiet folding down of cruising activity from London Park in the late 1940s and the Gordon Stairs in the late 1950s in the face of site regulation by urban design - attempts to drive out homosexual cruising from Independence Park in the 1990s were faced with strong opposition by the now-organized gay community. Struggles over the park required the community to politicize by electing gay representatives for city council, entering legal suits against the city, and organizing public protests against attempts to 'clean the city from homosexuality' - such as the installion of high-voltage lighting and trimming of bushes (Figure 3) - claiming that homosexuality is part of the city and should have 'a place' within it. Gay political activity in defense of the park as territory generated impressive public consensus that homosexuality is indeed part of society. Over the years homosexuality has been acknowledged as a legitimate variant of the Israeli even by such homophobic institutions as the Israel Defense Forces (IDF), as shown by Kaplan (1999) and Belkin and Levitt (2001). In this context, the park's transformative redesign between 2007 and 2009, not only permitted by the gay community but even welcomed by it, should be examined as a change of policy made by a politically organized community in the city. Why was the park effectively given over by the community to the general public after over 40 years of use as a distinct territory of homosexuality in the city?

'I haven't cruised the park in years' says Gadi Sasson, former editor of The Pink Time. 'For a while I kept supporting the struggle against park redesign because I thought of it as a "last resort" in case gays are again outcast from mainstream society. A safety net if you will. But then I realized that demanding to be included in every corner of the city cannot go hand in hand with self-exclusion into the park' (Sasson, 2008). Gays interested in integration into mainstream society as equal and 'normal' have come to associate the park with closeted life choices identifying homosexuality with

4a, 4b

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sex in public space, and therefore as deeply threatening to their political struggle for inclusion. 'I don't feel the need to defend the vent of a closeted group which is not interested in me anyway and is in fact against me' stated the user 'Konito' on the Religious Gays web forum on the Tapuz portal, whose members have all gone or are presently going through painful coming-out processes.[6]

Examining the park landscape before and after its redesign in 2009 we point to a dramatic change in gay self-identity and its inclusion in the city's and nation's political body: it seems that the community is no longer interested in presenting itself as a critique of heteronormativity, but rather as a subset to be included within it. The park's redesign, as depicted by painter Raffi Peretz whose art is often used by gay community leaders as illustrations of an ideal state of inclusion, is in fact a square (Figure 4). The park landscape is leveled and open from all directions, its boundaries clear and all activities visible. Depicted in mid-day, none of the park's visitors is there alone: all are grouped in couples or families, and heterosexuals mix with homosexuals. Comparison with Hana Sahar's photograph of 2002 depicting a man walking the park lanes at night (Figure 3b), as well as with Gadi Sasson's 2005 picture of high voltage lighting installed to drive away cruising (Figure 3a), is striking. Park user, landscape and image have changed irrevocably. Renovations included removing shrubbery and 'caves', exposing the center of the park, installing lighting to illuminate the entire area and a large play area for children, and the planting of lawns. Cruising in the park,

Figure 3a: Lighting post in the park, 2005. Photography: Gadi Sasson.

Figure 3b: A Man in the Park, 2003. Photography: Hana Sahar.

Figure 4: Independence Park, 2010, after its renovation. Painting by Raffi Peretz, courtesy of the artist. Note the open landscape, in which gay and straight couples stroll as equals, with dogs, children and strollers.

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still claimed by bloggers to be necessary for closeted men, has become impossible (Halperin, 2009). These men have moved to another site, as done before by cruisers following attempts to drive them out by use of landscape and urban design.[7]

Gay activists have slowly replaced territorial appropriation as a mode of action with more mainstream modes of action, such as participation in City Council and lawsuits against commercial and state institutions, recruiting legal and political systems to insist on their rights (Blank, 2003; Harel, 1996). Seeking inclusion in mainstream culture and identity, gay leadership has let go of Independence Park as an appropriated territory, stating they no longer require a separate territory for a separate identity. As declared by Yaniv Weizman, a gay-community leader and member of the City Council:

> *Use of a public park for sex does not respect any man … Independence Park's historical role … as a site of refuge and casual sex has ended, and it is about to become a beautiful public park* (Weizman, in Halperin, 2009).

Several figures in the community critiqued letting go of Independence Park as a means to declare gay persecution as past and integrate into mainstream society:

> *[The gay community] has chased normalcy… attempting to be straighter than the straight, more muscular, more masculine. In order to win the desired entry ticket to normative society, we became closed-hearted and racist like everybody else… it is time we stop striving for copycat normalcy… and be happy with what we are: not the majority but a minority* (Manor, 2009: 1).[8]

By performing bodily variations on the 'proper' image of the good national citizen, homosexual cruisers conducted 'urban design' of Independence Park, appropriated from public urban space and marked as gay territory. They thereby used the very mechanism identified by Weiss to have formed the Israeli nation-state itself: the appropriation of a specific territory to serve an autonomous identity via the mutual design of body and territory (Weiss, 2002). The group's performance in their seemingly marginal enclave in the city cannot therefore be disconnected from the context of the Israeli nation-state. Revoking Independence Park in 2009, the gay community aspired to be included in mainstream urban and national community. The global nature of gay identity and community thereby reflects a global perspective on the identity of Tel Aviv, contributing to its goal to become a 'world city'. Debates within the community acknowledge its use for the branding of Tel Aviv as a 'World City' and for attracting gay tourism, based on the global nature of gay identity (Cohen, 2013). Furthermore, the relative freedom and integration of gays in national society and institutions, for example the IDF, is presented by the State of Israel in its foreign publications in attempt to re-brand as a tolerant, first-world nation state (Embassy of Israel in London, 2013).[9] Interestingly, revoking the autonomy of Independence Park the gay community no longer declares itself to be a separate entity in Israeli culture in need of a territory in and of itself. In a national society based on the idea of the desperate need of autonomous territory, the gay community interestingly still presents a deep critique of mainstream society.

CONCLUSION: THE INTERPLAY OF GLOBAL, CITY AND NATION AS OVERLAPPING SPATIAL OEUVRES

Homosexual cruising is not specific to Tel Aviv or to Israel but rather exists in and around urban public spaces of many cities (Chauncey, 1995), and is explicitly connected to the global 'gay nation' and to urban enclaves of homosexuality in other cities and nations. Nonetheless, examining Independence Park in Tel Aviv suggests that negotiations over this urban park as oeuvre *explicitly conflate the urban, the global and the national,* three spatial frames of reference typically understood in the

literature as competing with or alienated from each other (see for example Castells, 2004, 2000). This conflation, materialized in a concrete urban park in Tel Aviv and via actions like bodily urban design, unsettles the sharp distinction between global, state and city - and may suggest such socio-spatial conflation elsewhere.

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ENDNOTES

1. See 'Tel Aviv Global City' on the city's formal website: http://www.tel-aviv.gov.il/eng/GlobalCity/Pages/GlobalCityLoby.aspx?tm=24

2. Landscape architect Zvi Dekel, responsible for the park's redesign, formerly worked for Abraham Karavan, chief gardener of the city of Tel Aviv in the 1940s, who designed Independence Park. See: http://www.nrg.co.il/online/54/ART1/914/293.html. (Hebrew).

3. Interestingly, all three Independence Parks serve as homosexual cruising sites.

4. The distinction made in this paper between 'homosexual' and 'gay' adheres to a political change in this identity from homo-sexuality as a sexual practice to the idea of 'pride.' The Hebrew word for 'proud,' *ge'ay,* bears a phonetic resemblance to the English word 'gay,' therefore gay/ge'ay is used in Hebrew to describe politically aware and 'out' homosexuals.

5. Recent design changes in the park have dramatically reduced cruising activity (see below).

6. See discussion at the Tapuz portal 'religious gays' web forum, October 26-28, 2009: http://www.tapuz.co.il/forums2008/viewmsg.aspx?forumid=1190&messageid=135034378 (Hebrew).

7. The current site used for cruising, in its early stages of its con-solidation, is the park north of the Tel Aviv central train station.

8. Dori Manor is a celebrated poet, who has written poems about the park. http://www.haaretz.co.il/opinions/1.1274818. (Hebrew). In addition, several action groups for 'saving Independence Park and other sites of cruising' were formed by citizens. See for example: https://groups.google.com/forum/?fromgroups=#!topic/glbt-city4all-tlv/FaxAgIfvzj8. (Hebrew).

9. See Embassy of Israel in London 'Discover Israel: Liberal Views' section: http://www.embassyofisrael.co.uk/discover-israel/liberal-values/, accessed September 2013.